



Even More Daylight Savings

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

A West Texas farmer was overheard engaging in the ever-popular practice of criticizing daylight savings time. “It takes my chickens three or four weeks to adjust to the new time,” he said.

There was some humor, and more than a little seriousness, in the comment. The farmer was suddenly showing up in the henhouse an hour earlier, throwing the routine off a bit. But the story is representative of public opinion about a government order to change our clocks twice a year. It continues to be controversial.

Daylight savings time is being expanded across the country this year, courtesy of a new federal law, the Energy Policy Act of 2005. Most of us will turn our clocks ahead on the second Sunday in March—that’s March 11 this year—and turn them back on the first Sunday in November. That’s about eight months of daylight savings time, one more month than in recent years.

The law change is designed to save energy. Moving the clock ahead takes one hour of summer daylight from the early morning, when we use less electricity, and moves it to the evening hours. That tends to curb our use of lamps and some appliances, including televisions and stereos, which account for one-quarter of an average home’s electricity consumption.

Studies by a federal agency show that daylight savings time trims electricity usage by a small but significant amount, perhaps one percent a day. Put another way, an extra month of daylight savings time will save the U.S. the equivalent of 300,000 barrels of oil.

But daylight savings enjoys popular support across the country—and particularly in Texas—because it effectively makes longer summer evenings possible. That means more daylight and more time outdoors—for baseball, grilling, swimming, gardening or simply enjoying an evening walk.

Longer days, or more evening sunlight, is also good for business. A recent Houston Chronicle story featured interviews with local patio restaurant owners, and recreation and golf course managers. All agreed that daylight savings time boosted their patronage.

Benjamin Franklin is credited with the idea of daylight savings. While U.S. Minister to France, he noticed that during some parts of the year, the sun rose while most people were still asleep.

This was well before the electric light. But Franklin calculated that resetting clocks to move

that “extra” hour of sunlight to the evening could save (he guessed) one million francs per year on candles.

Franklin’s idea eventually caught on in Europe, and spread to the U.S. in the 20th century. It was imposed in the U.S. during World War I, but initially proved wildly unpopular and was repealed by Congress a short time later.

There have been experiments with year-round, federally-mandated daylight savings time, during World War II and during the 1973 OPEC oil embargo. For a while, some states even allowed local governments to decide on the time change, creating near-chaos.

Today, some sunny areas—notably Arizona, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and some territories—still refuse to observe daylight savings time at all.

Even in states like Texas, where most of us have come to embrace daylight savings time, critics remain. The idea of government pushing us to modify our behavior—even for laudable reasons—strikes a number of people the wrong way.

And, of course, whenever the government mandates anything, there’s always politics involved. A perfect example is the extension this year of daylight savings time into November.

Halloween has become a major source of revenue for candy manufacturers. But many parents won’t allow their children to go trick-or-treating after dark. So candy makers have been lobbying for years to extend daylight savings time safely past Oct. 31. As luck would have it, the new law does exactly that.

There are pluses and minuses to adding an extra month to daylight savings time. Hopefully, we’ll find that the advantages, including energy savings, boost to business and additional light for outdoor activities will outweigh the potential downsides.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee’s Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee’s Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn’s previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column